

ARMY OFFICER MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN IRAQI AGRICULTURE

West Point Graduate Helps Revitalize Date Palm Industry in Diyala Province

(Baqubah, Iraq) Lieutenant Colonel Chris Johnson is a West Point graduate from Colorado. His wife is a Naval Academy graduate from Oregon.



LTC Johnson outside his Humvee in Diyala Province.

Johnson is, of course, anxious to get back home to his wife and three children but remains focused on the enormous challenges he faces in the Diyala province. Baqubah, which is the capital of the province, is only a few miles from where terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was



Aerial view of Date Palm Trees from U.S. Black Hawk helicopter.

killed in a June airstrike. It's still a hornet's nest of insurgent activity.

As one of the senior deputies to the Provincial Reconstruction Team, Johnson has had his hand on several agriculture projects.



Crowd gathers for the Baqubah Dates Festival.

Most notably, he helped recruit Moldovan aircraft and pilots to conduct an aerial spraying campaign designed to rid Diyala of dobas bug infestations in the date palm trees.



The gunner inside LTC Johnson's Humvee en route to the Baqubah Dates Festival.

"We painted Iraqi flags on the aircraft and gave the Moldovan pilots Iraqi uniforms in the hopes that they wouldn't come under hostile fire. It worked," says Johnson. "In fact, the mayor's office received reports that insurgents, who sometimes hide in the date palm tree groves, were equally as pleased that we had attacked the dobas bug populations."



MAJ. Snow and McKellips share cigars after a successful mission.

Johnson's team is working on several agriculture projects all aimed at helping revive Iraq's most promising sector.

Photos and story by Paul McKellips, U.S. Department of State, Public Affairs GO Team, on assignment in Iraq.

